

# The Role of Competition in the Classroom

## 授業活動における競技性の役割

William De Luna

デルナ・ウィリアム

**Abstract:** Competition is an omnipresent force that has not only transcended nature throughout history, but has also managed to find its way into the classroom. It is often used as a form of motivation and enjoyment that is fueled by extrinsic and intrinsic activities. Scholars may argue that it does not serve a valuable purpose in academia as there may be various negative effects attributed to the concept of rivalry. The concept of cooperative learning is preferred much more as the method of classroom interaction. In order to discern and better understand whether or not competition is conducive to education, it is important to look deeper at the various dynamics involved. This paper will introduce and explore not only some of the fundamentals of competition, but will delve deeper into the psychological and even physiological factors at play.

**Keywords:** competition, self-perception, education, psychology, games

**要旨:** 競争は時代を超え至る所に存在する力であり、教育現場においても見出されるようになってきた。そこでは、外的・内的刺激を伴う諸活動が引き起こす、動機づけや娯楽の要素としてしばしば用いられる。学究性を重んじる識者の中には、競争という概念の否定的な影響を指摘し、アカデミアにおいては価値ある目的を果たすことはないとする向きもある。実際、学習者の相互的活動を促進する方法としては、協同学習の方がはるかに好まれている。競争という概念が教育に役立つものであるか否かを判断し、十分に理解するためには、競争が含意する様々な社会文化的力学を検討することが重要である。本稿では、競争に関する基本原理を紹介し、その過程に作用している心理的要因、そして物理的要因にまで掘り下げて考察する。

**キーワード:** 競争、自己認知、教育、心理学、ゲーム

## 1. Introduction

Competition has been a ubiquitous force that transcends into virtually all aspects of life, and the classroom is no exception. Due to its multifaceted and less-than harmonious nature, scholars are divided by the importance of its presence in academia. This becomes more understandable as we take a closer look at the diverse pros and cons of this visceral phenomenon. Put simply, competition can bring out the worst and best among people. The most salient aspects of competition reveal that it has been a springboard for some of the greatest advancements, especially when faced with daunting adversity. The drive to outdo the rest and be the best has been a major driving

force in man's greatest achievements such as the Olympics, the splitting of the atom and the first footsteps on the moon. At its core, competition is much more than just winning and losing, we can observe that psychological and biological elements are the cogs that turn the wheels of this seemingly innate force. The aim of this paper is to explore those factors through an anthropological point of view with an emphasis of self-perception as well as its presence within the classroom at college level.

If the types of competition were divided into two areas, they would fall into the categories of recreational and survival, both heavily influenced by physiological elements. Before delving into deeper concepts, it's important to recognize and identify the various forms of competition within the language learning classroom and why they are implemented. Under this umbrella we can find a plethora of conspicuously competitive activities that take the form of games. Word races, crossword puzzles, Scrabble, bingo, hangman are among countless other activities often used when learning English as an L2 learner. Despite being enjoyable and interesting, these forms of competitions hold little academic relevance and merit within the universities. If anything, they are often intended to promote motivation and cooperation among peers within academia.

Some of the kinds of competitions that take place in colleges involve activities that take the form of giving bonus points for answering questions in a timely manner or giving extra credit for those who do specific activities first. The primary purpose of competition within the classroom is to motivate students in a fun and engaging way with some educational objectives. This belief underscores the idea that happiness leads to success and not necessarily the other way around (Lyubomirsky, King & Diener. 2004) On the other hand, students trying to outdo their peers vying for the top marks in the class is not that uncommon either. However, without the fun factor involved, this kind of competition becomes more about inflating the ego and less about mutual cooperation. This is where competition can show its ugly side in which students deliberately undermine their peers by refusing the exchange of helpful information resulting in the loss of academic gain.

## **2. An Opportunity for Comparison**

In essence, competition is much more than being the best, it is an opportunity to compare oneself and discover rank among others. Just as a map is useful when traversing foreign lands, it is useful to consider the juxtaposition of the self in order to

better understand the environment of possibilities. In the case of a college student, one may have a better understanding of what they are capable of and strive to improve at a more rapid pace. A study in the early 1900's by Norman Triplett (Bronson & Merryman, 2013) attempted to prove that competition was innate. The research involved a couple hundred children, some as young as five. Though the study was not able to explicitly conclude that competition was indeed inborn in man, overall its presence allowed the majority of the children to perform the assigned task better. Similar research studies have confirmed that the mere presence of others while doing a challenging activity leads to improved performance. Comparing ultimately allows people to see the potential available to them, this is reminiscent of the verse from 'All you need is love' (Lennon), *there's nothing you can do that can't be done*.

Competition forces one to look through the lens of self-evaluation and conversely, by doing so, it is understandable that people often experience a vortex of inadequacy or jealousy. For that very reason, Mark Twain once said, "Comparison is the death of joy." Even though it is not often the most mentally healthy phenomenon, researchers at the university of Indiana discovered that 12% of people's thoughts throughout the day revolve around concepts of self-evaluation and self-perception in some way shape or form. Some examples include comparing past, present and future projections of oneself to others. People especially tend to compare themselves to those who have similar characteristics (Goethals & Darley, 1977). Most likely, this is a very culturally sensitive study, in which societies that embrace egocentrism would be more likely to experience a higher percentage. Nevertheless, this statistic cannot be ignored and deserves to be taken into account.

According to Pajares and Schunk (2001), self-confidence is contextually bound and closely related to the notion that self-perception is synonymous with self-efficacy. It is difficult to think negatively about having a high self-confidence, however, with too much of it there can be some consequences. Often times, this leads to having a skewed image of themselves and the tendency to an over inflated self-esteem. Research has shown that students often assess themselves higher than the instructor's assessment (Ross, 2006). This can be disadvantageous because students may not study as much as they need to because they believe they are already good enough. Perhaps in an appropriately competitive environment, students and instructors alike can accurately self-reflect upon progress and results without bias.

### 3. Biological Evidence of Competition

Beyond the scope of extrinsic forces that evoke competition resides a special gene known as the COMT enzyme. During the fetal stages this enzyme becomes a producer of either *valine* or *methionine*. These chemicals are largely responsible for determining how one responds under stressful situations such as competition. Under stressful situations that may be induced by competitions, those with *valine* are able to think and process information four times faster than people with *methionine*. This concept is referred to as the idea that people are either Warriors, because they can perform well under pressure and the other are deemed Worriers, because they underperform compared to the others. This concept alone can easily be explored further, however the main point to be gained from this is that there is factual evidence that individuals are wired differently in relation to competitive environments.

In regards to competition and the sexes, there are studies that support the idea of how girls prefer pair work and conversely, boys prefer groups. Even studies of infant children support this claim (Bronson & Merryman, 2013). Based on this fact, instructors may opt to be a little more thoughtful when creating group activities, knowing that biological preferences may impede or induce success. Another sexually related reality is the presence of testosterone, which is often associated with aggression and violence; it was found that even chess players with higher testosterone levels performed better. It was concluded that the preferred influence of testosterone is that it acts as an emotion intensifier.

### 4. Competition and Motivation

Collaborative learning is the preferred choice of classroom interaction. This is the idea that promotes reciprocal reinforcement, whereas students gather in groups and take on specific roles in order to complete a project. This form of interaction, typically doesn't involve competition, however its implementation need not be ruled out. In actuality, it may be the preferred form of competitive milieu. According to Zucherman & Jost (2001), contrary to popular belief, people prefer not to witness the success of their friends in the case in which they do not. In other words, it's better for friends and partners to succeed together. Rather than implementing activities that result in one winner and one loser, it is best to have competitions in which multiple people can share the podium.

It's certainly important for instructors to be considerate and aware of individual and

classroom dynamics. In regards to motivation, one must realize that everyone has a different perspective and intake on their driving force. According to Bronson & Merryman (2013), there is a dichotomy that suggests that in competitions, there are those that participate in order to win and those who participate in order not to lose. There is empirical statistical evidence that suggests those who play to win clearly have the advantage. In one study involving soccer players, there was a 30% difference between sudden death kickers whose goal either won the game or tied it. This information can act as a reminder that student results will improve vastly when they believe that their efforts will be above par and praiseworthy. In the case of a classroom with many groups, it may be advantageous to prepare an ascending based rank-reward system.

## 5. Conclusion

In summation, it can be gained that students are individuals who have a complex array of factors that determine how they respond in light of competitive situations. Whether it's for the purpose of motivation, confidence building or a collaborative team activity, competition can benefit students not only for the *fun factor*, but also for the opportunity to have a clearer picture of their individual and collective progress. Ultimately, it is up to the instructor how competitions are utilized in the classroom, the aforementioned information and associated studies ought to offer valuable insights and be considered in order to improve the learning experience.

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